New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

Volume X, Number 29 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of December 26, 1949

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"The Rat Race"
"Caesar and Cleopatra"

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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"The Rat Race"

Daily Mirror

DECEMBER 23, 1949

'The Rat Race' Is Fine And Exciting Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "The Rat Race," Garson Kanin has penned a comedy with a philosophy. Between the comedy episodes, however, there are a few tears. Perhaps it should best be called a tragi-comedy. As the title implies, Kanin thinks the world, particularly New York, is a baffling maze, with people striving futilely to get somewhere, like rodents in a laboratory.

Helen Brown's trouble was that she was always living in the past. And that made her something of a pessimist. She had learned the facts of life the hard way, when her husband took a runout, and later as rumba contestant and taxi dancer. She was just about where she had started and knew she wasn't going anywhere.

But young Gus Hammer was just the opposite. He was a cock-eyed optimist. He lived for the future. He bought phony furs, placed his trust in con-men, and was a bit ashamed to admit that he came from Minneapolis. Being a saxophone player with ambitions, he didn't want to be thought an icky in the big town.

Financial difficulties forced Gus and Helen to share a broken-down furnished room, on a platonic basis, of course. Gus's optimism got them into a lot of scrapes, some of them dangerous. And Helen's pessimism usually pulled them out somehow. By the curtain's final fall, they had decided they weren't making much progress, but they'd be happier fighting the good fight together.

Leland Hayward has given the Ethel Barrymore Theatre's new tenant the benefits of capable Kanin staging, an interesting Donald Oenslager set and a good cast.

Betty Field is on the wonderful side as Helen. She is a specialist at roles calling for dumbness with a little depth, a tough exterior with a heart of gold, slang with a genteel touch. And she deservedly has a large following of loyal admirers.

Barry Nelson is the perfect type for Gus. He's big, wide-eyed, sort of helpless, and manages to garner a lot of sympathy. Pat Harrington and Dennie Moore are amusing as a pair of passe vaudevillians. And bows are due Rex Williams' oily hoodlum and Ray Walston's on-the-make telephone repairman.

Meriting salutes, too, are Joseph Sweeney and Doro Merande, who serve as commentators on the play's action. They are tops among our character performers.

Though we still prefer Kanin's "Born Yesterday" to "The Rat Race," the latter is well worth your attention. Though it lacks polish, continuity and genuine depth, it is exciting theatre. Producer Hayward has never had a flop, and his newest presentation should keep his record intact. The guy with the Midas touch has another hit, thanks to the persuasiveness of Miss Field. Despite Kanin's negative philosophy, "The Rat Race" looms a winner.

"THE RAT RACE"

Play by Garson Kanin; staged by Mr. Kanin; scenery and lighting by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Lucinda Ballard and Joseph Fretwell 3d; presented by Leland Hayward at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, December 22, 1949. The cast:

Mac.....Joseph Sweeney
Soda.....Doro Merande
Artie Bray.....Rex Williams
Helen Brown.....Betty Field
Telephone Man.....Ray Walston
Gus Hammer.....Barry Nelson
Bo Kerry.....Pat Harrington
Edie Kerry.....Dennie Moore
Frankie Jay.....Joe Bushkin
Tip.....Sherman Kane
Carl.....Georgie Auld
Carl's Girl.....Toni Tucci
Ralph.....Hal Green
Police Department.....
David Edelman
Policeman.....Paul Shiers
Waiter.....Joseph E. Bernard
Neighbors.....Johnny Dale and Belle Flower

Synopsis: The time is summer. The place is a piece of Manhattan.

Journal American

DECEMBER 23, 1949

Play at Barrymore Disappointment

By ROBERT GARLAND

No I-told-you-so Broadway columnist, I'd like to point out that, in the Journal-American of Nov. 19, 1948, I wrote of Barry Nelson as the most admirable and least celebrated actor among the admirable and celebrated actors in Moss Hart's "Light Up the Sky."

"When called on to play straighter than his fellows," I went on to write, "he brings credibility to a cartoon that can use it."

If, you, as well as I, thought that, as Peter Sloan, a young man with a play, Barry Nelson brought credibility to Moss Hart's "Light Up the Sky," wait until you see the credibility he brings to Garson Kanin's "The Rat Race" as Gus Hammer, a young man with a horn.

This, I take it, is no more than Mr. Nelson's second professional Broadway venture. In "Winged Victory," he was only semi-pro.

Now, after half-a-dozen years and half-a-dozen pictures, he is the most legitimate reason for going to see the Leland Hayward presentation of the Garson Kanin play in which Betty Field is starred, in which he, Doro Merande and Joseph Sweeney are featured.

For, as good as they can be, the others—Miss Field, Miss Merande and Mr. Sweeney—go through their, by now, familiar paces, while he——

• • •

'Disappointment'

Oh, all right," then, I'll stop this stalling and come out and say that the Leland Hayward presentation of the Garson Kanin play is a disappointment, pre-Pulitzer Owen Davis material with one touch of Elmer Rice and another of William Saroyan.

The Elmer Rice of "Street Scene," say; the William Saroyan of everything he has written since "The Time of Your Life."

Without those Rice-Saroyan trimmings, "The Rat Race" could be "Helen, the Uncultivated Call-Girl" or "More Sinned Against Than Reasonable." A minor cog in Mrs. Warren's workshop, her heart just isn't in it. Soon after the curtain's rise, her heart goes out to Hammer.

Gus, he is, the young man with a horn, melodrama's familiar hick from Hicksville, or, as in "The Rat Race," the fall guy from Fall River.

Arriving on Manhattan, he shares his room with Helen, which is bad for his morale and worse for Helen's business. He buys the furs fall guys are always buying. He has his horns—all three of them—stolen by phoney jammen. And I think he thinks that Helen is a good girl.

So he won't be helped by Helen, he will get hurt by gangsters, and, at the curtain's fall, Miss Brown is planning to be Mrs. Hammer.

• • •

Old Melodrama

At the Barrymore, it's not always easy to decide whether "The Rat Race" is intended to be comedy, tragedy or rare old melodrama. The plot is rare old melodrama. The trimmings, the Ricean Soda, the Saroyan Mac, make up a sort of tragic-comic, comic-tragic chorus.

Soda, sitting at a window, is Doro Merande from "The Silver Whistle." Mac, sitting in a garden, is Joseph Sweeney from "Arsenic and Old Lace."

Even when they're in the play, they remain outside it. And when they're outside the play, their words aren't always apposite. Or any too worth hearing. For the most part, they interrupt and add nothing that, in your own eyes and ears, has not already happened.

The other members of the large and worthy cast seem also outside a play which remains remote and unbelievable.

It is here, on this lack of believability, that the Barry Nelson of my opening paragraphs returns. It is believable he, a most oncoming young actor, who provides the new Leland Hayward presentation with an excellent reason for being seen by playgoers concerned about the theatre's welfare...

Donald Oenslager's setting is Mielzinerian but distracting, Betty Field's call-girl is Fieldian but familiar and Garson Kanin's "The Rat Race" is Kaninian but no "Born Yesterday."

The New York Times

DECEMBER 23, 1949

Betty Field in Garson Kanin's Idyll About People in a New York Rooming House

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Looking at New York from a wistful distance Garson Kanin has written an amiable and aimless rooming-house idyll, "The Rat Race," which opened at the Ethel Barrymore last evening. Nothing in "Born Yesterday," which Mr. Kanin wrote, is as charming as this free-hand sketch of a girl who has abandoned hope in New York and of a boy who is on tip-toe with hope and enthusiasm.

* * *

And nothing is more actable than the principal characters and the neighborhood rag-tag and bobtail who move in and out of the performance. As the flat-voiced, heavy-hearted rumba queen, Betty Field gives a lovely, glowing performance; and all her associates come bearing gifts that should be appreciated by people who admire superior acting.

Although Mr. Kanin has great talent for dialogue, people and parts, "The Rat Race" is sketchy to the point of limpness. His impressionistic method results in an artful narrative that does not have much vitality or point. "Born Yesterday" may be commoner stuff, but it is pithier and more single-minded; and it is still the best play Mr. Kanin has written.

* * *

For the "Rat Race," substitute the squalid life of penniless people drifting around the lower depths of this city. The girl thinks she is through. She is bitter, disillusioned and broken. The boy has just come to New York from the Middle West to make his mark as a saxophone player—ingenuous but exuberant. To Mr. Kanin she is the person who lives in the past and he is the one who lives in the future. At the end of the third act "The Rat Race" brings them happily to the same period in time. They both are living in the present when the curtain comes down.

There is a lot of charming, homely stuff along the way, written tenderly or humorously and played with skill and lightness. The function of a chorus is provided by an old codger who loafs in a beer-garden, admirably played by Joseph Sweeney; and a sharp-tongued, pious landlady who leans garrulously out of a window—a part expertly played by Doro Merande. Downstairs lives a couple of unemployed vaudeville players who happen in and out casually. Dennie Moore plays the woman with a kind of warm and relaxed sincerity, and Pat Harrington plays the man with brassy, comic gusto.

* * *

Mr. Kanin has lovingly attended to the direction, which is easy and imaginative. Donald Oenslager has designed an impressionistic setting that reveals the tawdriness and poverty of a rooming-house and catches odd corners of a worn-out neighborhood.

In this dreary environment Miss Field gives a superb performance that ranks with the best work in our theatre, portraying a cheap girl who has gone dead inside but somehow retains the splendor of youth. In the opposite part Barry Nelson gives a shining performance of a modest boy of courage and eagerness and establishes himself as a young actor who does not need the protection of type-casting any more.

* * *

There are several other pieces of good acting. Rex Williams is particularly good as a rasping, gloating gangster. The narrative also finds a place for some musicians who double successfully as actors. If the acting throughout is so colorful and enjoyable, Mr. Kanin must have laid the groundwork in his writing as well as in the direction. Obviously, he has.

As "The Rat Race" moves quietly and impulsively through the evening, it turns up a number of beguiling scenes, quick glances into the hearts of characters and tokens of generous understanding. But Mr. Kanin seems to be looking on from too great a distance to make either a firm play or a deeply felt work of art out of his material.

The Sun

DECEMBER 23, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Not Much of a Play.

Garson Kanin, who brought sorcery into the theater as the author-director of "Born Yesterday," lost the trick last night at the Barrymore. He has tossed together a great deal of everything—gags, atmosphere, vaudeville, sentiment, melodrama—into "The Rat Race," put on by Leland Hayward, but he never did get around to writing himself a play.

Playwright Kanin takes his jabs at the delirium of New York as he presents the problems of a girl and boy caught up in the big-city rat race, even as you and I. He has given thought to the rebuffs and the disappointments that await newcomers to the frenzy of Manhattan Island as he shows how tough it is for a girl from Columbus and a young saxophone player from Minneapolis to cope with metropolitan coldness and heartlessness.

The dramatist-director is helped along by fine performances from Betty Field and Barry Nelson, but "The Rat Race" remains a scanty and dawdling play. Here and there it comes to life, as in a vaudeville bit from Pat Harrington and as in a touching boy-and-girl scene near the final curtain, but for most of the way "The Rat Race" is faltering and tedious. Kanin's facility for pungent dialogue, which asserted itself in "Born Yesterday," is missing in the new piece on the Barrymore stage.

Betty Field, an actress from whom great deeds are to be expected during years to come, plays the bitter and disillusioned girl from Ohio, once the winner of a dance contest, with terseness and rare skill. Barry Nelson is thoroughly ingratiating as the saxophone wizard from Wisconsin, the young innocent who buys cheap furs from trucks on street corners, allows a gang of hoodlums to steal his horns, and permits Miss Rhumba, broke and hungry, to share his lodging-house rooms on his own unrealistic terms. Miss Field and Nelson do a great deal more for the characters of Helen Brown and her sax-playing Gus than Garson Kanin did in the writing of them.

For all of these years I've been insisting that Doro Merande, of the cracked, flat voice, and Joseph Sweeney, of the wild and quizzical stares, deserve places as all-time members of the Morehouse stock company—they have given our town some sharp and enormously entertaining performances — but they were actually tiresome last evening as the play's narrators. The truth is, "The Rat Race" lets them down.

Ray Walston has an amusing scene; Pat Harrington strives to bring life to an interlude or two and Rex Williams plays a vicious racketeer with considerable effect. The tricky and elaborate scenery has been done in Donald Oenslager's best style.

"The Rat Race" is a comedy with atmosphere, showmanship—and no heart at all. Here it is late December, and then a dramatist of Garson Kanin's stature turns in such a hollow and strident hodge-podge it's time to become a bit worried. Leland Hayward, the man of the big hits, misses this time.

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 23, 1949

'The Rat Race' Has Good Scenes, Fine Set, but Is Lacking a Story

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Garson Kanin's new comedy, "The Rat Race," which was presented last evening at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, is a rueful and sometimes bitter chronicle of the lives of two unimportant, no-account young people on that street of dreams, Broadway. It is attractively played by Betty Field, Barry Nelson and some interesting type-actors, and in it are scenes which are in Mr. Kanin's best funny vein. But the author, who also directed, has not managed enough suspense and continuity in his story to make "The Rat Race" as absorbing as I hoped it would be.

This play should have been and could have been as excellent a work as Dorothy Dodds Baker's novel, "Young Man With a Horn." It tells of a saxophone player who takes the bus from his native Minneapolis to try his fortunes in New York. It tells also of a girl who, having once won a rumba contest, dreamed of becoming the toast of the big town.

The girl has been in New York longer than the boy, so she has become embittered by the time he arrives with his saxes and his hopes. They are thrown together

in a furnished room in the seamy part of the theatrical district.

Ingenious Setting.

Mr. Kanin offers pieces of the story of these two—how the boy gets bilked and robbed and how the girl endures the drab life of a dance-hall hostess. Some times Miss Field and Mr. Nelson play the story themselves; at other times Doro Merande and Joseph Sweeney, a landlady and a restaurant proprietor, fill in the gaps by chatting with the audience.

The setting of "The Rat Race," by Donald Oenslager, is perhaps the play's best feature—and any time scenery becomes as good and interesting as this a playwright is in peril. Mr. Oenslager has designed a rooming house, as seen from the outside. Occasionally Miss Merande, the landlady, leans out of her window like a mean Mollie Goldberg and tells the audience what has been going on between Boy and Girl. Miss Merande is very funny, and her lines are as hard and cruel as Mr. Kanin can make them.

Again, on the other side of the stage, Mr. Sweeney will gab pleasantly on the Boy-Girl subject. Between Mr. Sweeney and Miss Merande is the outer wall of the furnished room, and often this wall will rise and reveal Miss Field and Mr. Nelson in the touching and funny business of being two failures in an unfriendly city.

Harrington Scores.

Into this furnished room come various characters — policemen, slick thieves and a has-been vaudeville team. The best-played and most enjoyable moment of "The Rat Race" is where Pat Harrington, acting a vaudevillian, tries to prove that Irving Berlin stole "God Bless America" from a song Pat had written years before. This incident is a little gem.

There are many incidents and many little gems in the play, but the story is so fragmentary that it failed to arouse my concern. I thought that Mr. Nelson made a very appealing bumpkin and that Miss Field played the girl with grace and skill—but I didn't seem to care a great deal whether they fell in love or not.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 23, 1949

By HOWARD BARNES

Strictly a Rat Race

IN "The Rat Race" Garson Kanin has written at great length and to very little effect about the seamier side of metropolitan existence. There are times at the Ethel Barrymore Theater when his talent flames brightly. But the author-director has mixed a plaintive parable about little people with ribald burlesque and incidental business so randomly that his show is meaningless and fatiguing. Betty Field is on hand to give some substance to a tale about a dance hall trollop who falls for a yokel with a saxophone and Barry Nelson, Doro Merande, Joseph Sweeney and the other players do their level best to leaven the work with compassion and comedy. Their efforts are not nearly enough to make the production satisfying.

• • •

It is possible that Kanin picked the wrong medium for his jangling theatrical symphony. Even with a tricky Donald Oenslager setting of a street intersection in what is referred to in the program as "a piece of Manhattan" there is no cumulative action in "The Rat Race." Sweeney and Miss Merande alternately attempt to pluck philosophical truths out of the piece in a sort of Greek chorus duet. Rex Williams contributes fragments of melodrama and Joe Bushkin, Georgie Auld and Sherman Kane appear in a welcome interlude in which they play hot music before stealing the instruments of the sucker from Minneapolis. In a book, or in a musical score "The Rat Race" might have a certain appeal. On the stage it is repetitious, tasteless and contrived.

• • •

Miss Field comes the closest to realizing whatever Kanin had in the back of his mind when he composed the drama. Her characterization of the dime a dance girl, who once won a cup in a rhumba dance contest and is forever living in the past, is flavorsome and persuasive. It is not her fault that the episodes in which she appears never catch her up in a continuity of consequence. The climax finds her settling for the dumb cluck who lives in her furnished room for several weeks without paying attention to her obvious charms. It represents no more than a fractional move from the opening curtain.

• • •

Nelson looks and acts the part of the hick whose mind is on the future, but he rarely has a chance to give the dismal hero any dimensions. As a matter of fact, the conventional bystanders of a trite and tawdry romance have a better break than the principals. When Kanin has given them bitter and amusing lines, they make much of them. Pat Harrington, as a has-been who believes that Irving Berlin pilfered a song which he wrote in 1922 is fine in his few entrances, and Dennie Moore is untidily correct in the part of his wife. The author of "The Rat Race" may have held the mirror up to life, but it is a dull image that is reflected.

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 23, 1949

Betty Field Triumphs in 'Rat Race', Her Role Is Touching, Fascinating

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

As a singer goes along in her career, the greatest tests of her ability are familiar musical pieces, just as they are her greatest challenges. There is no reason why an actress in her prime should not act in familiar material, and that is just what Betty Field is doing, triumphantly, in "The Rat Race," a play that has all the charm and attraction of its title.

Garson Kanin, who has written better plays and will again, has contrived a sweaty opus here, considering the thought that it is tough to be ambitious, when you have little talent, and nothing else to go on.

Hardly an element in the play fails to echo. You catch yourself thinking of Gertrude Berg on television, Kathleen Norris serials, True Story, a play called "Our Town," another called "Two On An Island," and a picture called "Bicycle Thieves."

Loses Her Husband.

All were valid subjects of wide appeal, which deserve to be used over and over again, but not when they are made sordid instead of pathetic, and commonplace instead of familiar.

The people and incidents that abound around us have a place onstage only when they are touching or illuminating.

"The Rat Race" concerns a girl who quit Columbus, Ohio, with her husband, to go win dance contests, and lost him when they failed. (Katharine Brush's "Couple No. Six" was a lovely poignant treatment of this subject.) She is broke, about to lose her room, and looks fated for a call girl listing.

Bumpkin Shows Up.

A complete bumpkin, bound to be a musician, moves in and invites her to stay, platonically. (This springboard was once made classic by Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable.) Between them they lose, win and lose again the magnificent brass saxophones on which he meant to make his fame. They grow dependent on each other, as she begins to forget her past hopes, and he begins to fit his dreams to today instead of a misty future, and they end up willing to try it together.

Through all this Miss Field plays, as nobody else in the theater can, a girl who has not one distinguishing feature. She is tired and, as she would say, beat. Otherwise she could be any one of say 90 per cent of the unmarried females her age in New York.

A Touching Portrayal.

Miss Field keeps her utterly ordinary, but makes her breathe and pulsate. She makes the girl's cheapening bitterness reach out and touch you. She can project emotional minutiae like no other actress, and has the capacity of seeming so private, you might think you were alone in the audience. It is an entirely fascinating performance.

Barry Nelson is fresh and alive as the boy, though he would be simpler if he tried less to seem simple.

The landlady who gossips to the audience seems tailored for Doro Merande, who plays the role so familiarly that the character appears less unpleasant than it is. Joseph Sweeney is warm and mischievous as an aging Puck, who similarly explains things to the onlookers.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
DECEMBER 23, 1949

The Sorrows of a Jazz Musician
By Richard Watts Jr.

As a show, Garson Kanin's "The Rat Race," which opened last night at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, has certain virtues of humor, atmosphere and minor characterization. It is immeasurably brightened by the performances of Betty Field, one of the finest actresses on the American stage, and Barry Nelson, an oncoming young actor of engaging skill, in its leading roles. But the melancholy truth is that Mr. Kanin, whose "Born Yesterday" is still among the high points of our post-war theatre, has written a hollow, fabricated and superficial play, in which even the showmanship eventually loses its zest.

It seems a particular pity, not only because of its author's standing as a playwright and stage director, but also because, in the earlier scenes, it appears that he is on the verge of offering another warm and flavorsome American comedy. In "The Rat Race," he is studying the joys and sorrows, the hopes and the disillusionment, of the ambitious young jazz musicians and girl dancers, who come to New York bringing their dreams of conquest with them, only to run into the cold and merciless reality of a city callous to failure. The love story of two such romantic innocents seemed just the thing for him.

Promise

He had what might have appeared to be the proper setting in a broken-down rooming house, presided over by a garrulous and suspicious beldame and inhabited by trumpet players, jazz pianists, dance-hall girls and unemployed but still hopeful vaudeville actors. With so many opportunities for capturing the atmosphere and excitement of a no-doubt sordid but also vivid and touching segment of the city's life, there was every chance that Mr. Kanin might have given us a racy mixture of comedy and melodrama that did for the jazz musicians what the wonderful "Broadway" did for the prohibition nightclubs.

As I have said, the early sections indicate that "The Rat Race" is on the verge of giving effective dramatic form to the adventures in defeat and victory of its boy musician and girl dancer. The atmosphere is credible, the people likeable, and the humor of the minor characters is engaging. There is, in particular, a battered old vaudevillian, who had once tried to be a song-writer, and is fanatically jealous of Irving Berlin. Delightfully played by the veteran nightclub performer, Pat Harrington, this unvanquished relic of dead music-halls is a pleasure to meet. Then things begin going wrong.

Decline and Fall

For one thing, the author has an idea about presenting in his two central characters the mistake of living either exclusively in the past, as in the case of the girl, or in the future, as in the case of the young man, but it never quite works out. Then, too, the plan of having a kind of Greek chorus, represented by a friendly and philosophical neighbor and the chattering landlady, grows monotonous, even though the two roles are played by such splendid performers as Joseph Sweeney and Doro Merande. Chiefly, though, the trouble comes from the fabricated and mechanical quality of the complications which divide hero and heroine.

Miss Field has never been in better form than she is as the girl of the story, which means that she is direct, always believable and honestly moving in everything she does. And Mr. Nelson is genuinely touching and likeable as the guileless young man with a horn. They play admirably and make the final scene, where the boy and girl try to reorganize their lives after disaster has overtaken them, quietly touching. Their best efforts, however, cannot make up for the fact that "The Rat Race," for all Mr. Kanin's craftsmanship, is, in the end, flat and unexhilarating. The theatre can be a most discouraging place.

"Caesar and Cleopatra"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
DECEMBER 22, 1949

Shavian Dictator and Girl-Queen
By Richard Watts Jr.

Despite his wisdom, Bernard Shaw has always had a curious weakness for dictators. In so great a literary figure, however, even a weakness can be a strength. And, out of his odd hero-worship for the cold and ruthless Julius Caesar, and his strange identification of his own qualities of mind and temperament with those of the Roman despot, he wrote the delightful "Caesar and Cleopatra," which is not only one of his most beguiling comedies, but contains, in the part of the peculiarly Shavian Caesar, one of his most enchantingly-conceived characterizations of a man of genius.

As presented at the National Theatre last night, in the first performance seen in this city since 1925, when Lionel Atwill and Helen Hayes played it for the Theatre Guild, this playful, witty and immensely provocative variation on a historical theme emerges in all its brightness and splendor. With Cedric Hardwicke and Lilli Palmer ideally cast as the benevolent Roman and the kittenish Egyptian in a handsome and skillfully-wrought production, "Caesar and Cleopatra" stands head and shoulders above the routine exhibitions that the season has so far been content to offer. Indeed, it is even better than that.

The Stars

Sir Cedric has clearly not yet recovered from the laryngitis which held up the opening for an evening, but even with his voice still troubling him, he is a complete joy in a role which fits him to perfection. Both physically and temperamentally, the part which Shaw wrote seems suited to him, and his performance is as warm and witty and persuasive as this singularly winning role demands. As for Miss Palmer, she is so humorous and lovely as the girl-queen as to justify the rhapsodic things which her rather gushing admirers said about her last season in "My Name Is Aquilon." It is quite a tribute to her.

I don't suppose anyone will even try to follow the political

"CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA"

Play by Bernard Shaw; staged by Cedric Hardwicke; settings and costumes by Rolf Gerard; lighting by Jean Rosenthal; incidental music by Irma Jurist; presented by Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers in association with Julius Fleischmann at the National Theatre, December 21, 1949. The cast:

Caesar.....Cedric Hardwicke
Cleopatra.....Lilli Palmer
Nubian Slave..Robert Earl Jones
Fatateeta.....Bertha Belmore
Centurion.....Ronald Telfer
Pothinus.....Nicholas Joy
Theodotus.....Ivan Simpson
Ptolemy.....Donny Harris
Achillas.....Michael Harvey
Belzanor.....Norman Roland
A Persian.....Jules Getlin
Rufio.....Ralph Forbes
Britannus.....Arthur Treacher
Lucius Septimius....Si Oakland
Roman Sentinel.....
Clifford Carpenter
Apollodorus...John Buckmaster
First Auxiliary Sentinel...
Andrew George
Boatman.....Norman Roland
Harpmaster.....Harry Irvine
Iras.....Julana Caffrey
Charmian.....Mary Scott
First Palace Official.....
Ronald Telfer
Second Palace Official:...
John Ware
Major-Domo...Anthony Randall

Synopsis: Act I. Scene 1. The Sphinx in the desert on the Syrian border—an October night, 48 B.C. Scene 2: Throne room in the Palace on the Syrian border, immediately following. Scene 3: Council Chamber in the Palace in Alexandria, morning, some days later. Act II: Scene 1: Edge of the Quay before the Palace in Alexandria, noon, an October day, 48 B.C. Scene 2: Before the Lighthouse in the Harbor of Alexandria, late afternoon, same day. Act III: Scene 1: Cleopatra's Boudoir in the Palace in Alexandria, six months later. Scene 2: Roof of the Palace in Alexandria, early evening, same day. Scene 3: Esplanade before the Palace in Alexandria, high noon some time later.

"Caesar and Cleopatra"—*continued*

and military maneuvers of the Romans and Egyptians which compose the formal plot of this Shavian interpretation of history. What is important is the interplay of character, the flow of wit, wisdom and insight, the sheer pleasure of listening to the most lucid and sparkling prose style to be found in modern writing. That fondness for dictators may be Shaw's most eccentric and disturbing trait to a present-day audience, but in "Caesar and Cleopatra" he mixes it with such brilliant reflections on the state of mankind that it becomes all the more provocative in its viewpoint.

The Dictator

Athough it may be true that neither Julius Caesar nor any other dictator was ever the honor and glory of the world that Bernard Shaw makes his hero to be, that is not really the point. The interesting thing is the supposition involved. Let us suppose, the playwright seems to be saying, there was a man possessing the world power of Caesar, who had the virtues for accomplishing good that Shaw attributes to him, the humor, maganimity, understanding, compassion and tolerance of the Shavian dictator. What could he have achieved for mankind? We will never know, but it is fascinating to have a Bernard Shaw invent such a man and let us look at him.

Sir Cedric and Miss Palmer are of course the all-important figures of the play, but there are other fine performances in excellent parts. Ralph Forbes is better than I ever saw him as a loyal follower of Caesar, while Arthur Treacher as that intensely-English early Briton, Britannus; John Buckmaster as Apollodorus, Nicholas Joy as Pothinus, Si Oakland as a Roman soldier and Bertha Belmore as the frightening nurse with the unpronouncable name are excellent. The sets and costumes by Rolf Gerard are just right and the production moves with proper smoothness. The theatre becomes worth bothering about again.

Daily Mirror

DECEMBER 22, 1949

'Caesar and Cleopatra' Witty, Stimulating

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers, in association with Julius Fleischmann, brought a first-rate revival of Bernard Shaw's stimulating comedy, "Caesar and Cleopatra," to the National Theatre last evening. It is an authentic Shaw revival, co-starring and directed by Cedric Hardwicke, coached via mail from England by G. B. S. himself.

"Caesar and Cleopatra," like Shaw's better comedies, has something to say and says it amusingly. In this instance, Shaw is saying that the Romans gave the world good government, good roads and civilization, letting their satellite nations take care of art and literature.

Lurking beneath the Shavian wit is a suggestion of tragi-comedy—the situation of an aging Caesar recapturing a moment of what some might consider ridiculous flaming youth with a kittenish Cleopatra. But Caesar combined business, as usual, with his pleasure. He made a ruler out of a frightened, petulant girl.

Personally, we should like to see "Caesar and Cleopatra" again within a fortnight, for we suspect that the current production failed to put its best foot forward last evening. Hardwicke, as Caesar, was somewhat handicapped by the lingering effects of a laryngitis attack, and a tardy audience prevented us from hearing much of the first act.

Hardwicke has been schooled by Shaw in the ways of his plays over a period of years and you can bank on it that he is giving just such a performance as the master conceived. In his efforts to overcome his indisposition, to use an ailing throat to best effect, Hardwicke, we think, was compelled to slow down the tempo he had originally set for the play.

Lilli Palmer is a charming and quite-easy-on-the-eyes Cleopatra, a rather obvious mixture of feline, viper and vamp. Ralph Forbes, Arthur Treacher, John Buckmaster, Bertha Belmore and Nicholas Joy also merit salutes in other roles.

We liked particularly Buckmaster's conception of an effete, patrician and amateur artist. It has style and taste.

Rolf Gerard's settings and costumes, lighted by Jean Rosenthal, provide an effective background for Shaw's sage and entertaining observations on an interesting and dynamic era.

We recommend "Caesar and Cleopatra" to you. It offers an intelligent, literate and rewarding evening in the theatre. And it is by all odds the best comedy on Broadway. We doubt that you will see its match this season. It deserves to be a rousing hit.

Journal-American

DECEMBER 22, 1949

Shaw's Fine Comedy Let Down by Actors

By ROBERT GARLAND

It could have been the heat which enveloped the playgoers in the auditorium. It could have been the cold which enveloped the players on the stage. It could have been the direction which, now hot, now cold, fell, for the most part, in between.

It could have been, I am certain, the Bernard Shaw "Caesar and Cleopatra" which, in association with Julius Fleishmann, Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers were, as the word goes, reviving last night at the National.

For, to sit down and re-read it, this "history play for puritans" is well up among the Shavian finest, one of the three —the others, I believe, are "Androcles and the Lion" and "Saint Joan"—most likely to pass into the possession of posterity.

But not, I hate to tell you, as put on with Cedric Hardwicke as Caesar and Lilli Palmer as Cleopatra. Not that Mr. Hardwicke fails to favor Cleopatra's Old Gentleman. Not that Miss Palmer fails to favor Caesar's Dream Witch.

Take my word that, in the costumes, against the backgrounds of Rolf Gerard, Cedric Hardwicke is "Bernard Shaw in a toga" and Lilli Palmer is "your Cleopatra, Dolabella's Cleopatra, everybody's Cleopatra" and the sexiest Cleopatra you could wish to see.

* * *

Let Down Play

But Bernard Shaw's kindly dictator and unkindly queen call for more than Shavian togas and super-sex. If, as the playwright insists, the play to which they give their names is "better than Shakespeare," "Caesar and Cleopatra" must be played that way.

Last night, at the National, it was not! Again I admit it could have been the over-heated playgoers or the under-heated players, Cedric Hardwicke's in-between direction or the illness from which he has been suffering. But, even if only temporary—

In this, its second New York revival, "Caesar and Cleopatra" was, at its premiere, let down by its players. They looked their parts, they dressed their parts, but they seldom, if ever, talked or walked their parts. Or played them from anywhere within.

So the "history play for puritans" came through as a triangular period piece with Antony, its hypotenuse, away. Next to himself, Caesar loved Cleopatra. Next to her army, Cleopatra loved Antony, the man who was not there!

"Caesar and Cleopatra" is, I grant you, anti-romance as well as anti-Shakespeare. At the National, not much of its anti-romanticism and anti-Shakespeareanism came through. Too frequently for a Shavian like me, it was merely anti-Shaw.

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In its acting-for-acting's-sake department, "Caesar and Cleopatra" faired best with John Buckmaster's Apollodorus, Bertha Belmore's Ftatateeta and Michael Harvey's Achillas, general to Ptolemy with "his fine black beard curled like the coat of a poodle."

In the Rufio of Ralph Forbes and the Britannus of Arthur Treacher, the satiric Shavian brush-strokes once in awhile came through, but, especially in the latter, you—I, at any rate—missed the performances that have gone before.

The entire cast, in which Mr. Hardwicke and Miss Palmer are starred and Mr. Buckmaster, Miss Belmore, Mr. Forbes, Mr. Treacher, Nicholas Joy and Ivan Simpson are featured, was in need of over-all direction. All too frequently, it wandered!

While never on the show-off side, the settings and costumes by Rolf Gerard were fresh and colorful. The lighting by Jean Rosenthal was, I fancy, as it should be. The incidental music by Irma Jurist was, I am certain, arty.

Bernard Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra" is a worthier play, a funnier comedy and a better show than it was last night at the opening of its second New York revival. It could improve as it goes along, if it goes along. I sincerely hope it does!

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
DECEMBER 22, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Hail, Great Caesar

AN ENCHANTING revival of Bernard Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra" is to be seen at the National Theater. The comedy has lost none of its zest, wit and buoyancy during something over fifty years. It is captivatingly served in the current production. Cedric Hardwicke is so splendid as the conqueror of a world who remembered at the last moment to send Marc Antony to the volatile Queen of Egypt that his direction is likely to be overlooked. It happens that he has made a work which might have seemed dated or laggard a complete delight. Lilli Palmer supports him dynamically as Cleopatra, and the lesser roles are handled with immense authority. Since the settings and costumes by Rolf Gerard are quietly elegant, there is little wanting in a show which has not been done here since Helen Hayes and Lionel Atwill played the leading roles almost twenty-five years ago.

* * *

The Shavian satire is many-facetted in its contemplation of the man who anteceded Shakespeare's hero on the Nile. It is given precise and comic accents at the National. "Caesar and Cleopatra" has wisdom coupled with irony and great theatrical flavor. Whether the noble Roman is discovering a wild child hiding in a Sphynx in the desert on the Syrian border, confounding his Egyptian enemies in the harbor of Alexandria, or merely commenting on morals and ethics, he is a figure of fascinating proportions. Most of the action is implicit in the situations and lines, but it has remarkable pace and variety. The motion picture version of the drama, starring Claude Rains and Vivien Leigh, lost much of its power by projecting scenes of panoply and uproar. Shaw was writing for the theater in this play and it stands up staunchly on a stage.

* * *

Hardwicke's assignment has been doubly arduous, but it never reveals that fact. His Caesar is the imperturbable man of action, who exchanges the arts of government for those of craftsmen, insists that there be no vengeance, punishment or judgment, but is pragmatic enough to utilize them at the proper time. He is an old and somewhat tired man, but not one to trifle with. The actor has given fine performances in the past. He has rarely equalled this. In his staging he has been content to reveal the full meaning of a drama which is largely conversational and he has succeeded here as brilliantly as he has in the chief role.

Miss Palmer plays Cleopatra with a subtle blend of vivacity and viciousness. When she is learning important truths from her elderly lover, she is vastly appealing. At the same time, her brutal order to have Ptolemy's toutor assassinated finds her almost demoniac. Bertha Belmore is excellent as the Ftateeta who carries out her mistress's instructions when she finds it to her advantage and Nicholas Joy is good as the ill-fated victim of a young queen's rage. Then there are Ralph Forbes, as Caesar's general, Furio; Arthur Treacher, in the part of Brittanus; Ivan Simpson as the aged Theodotus, and John Buckmaster, as an amateur of the arts who smuggles Cleopatra out of her palace prison. All of them collaborate on a rich and eloquent performance. The incidental music by Lyma Jurist, incidentally, is exactly in the right key for a striking revival of a fine play.

The New York Times
DECEMBER 22, 1949

Shaw's 'Caesar and Cleopatra' With Cedric Hardwicke and Lilli Palmer

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Sir Cedric Hardwicke is seriously handicapped with laryngitis, it is not fair to judge his performance in Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra," which was put on at the National last evening. Although the production is gorgeous and the performance is sound, it lacks lightness and sparkle. These are qualities that Sir Cedric can hardly bring to his portrait of Caesar until his voice has cleared and acquired the crisp, ironic tone of Shavian talk.

But Lilli Palmer is not only in good health but in radiant spirit, and her Cleopatra is nothing short of ideal. Miss Palmer has personal beauty that is notable on its own account. But her limpid, girlish, roguish Cleopatra is also a superb exposition of character that would delight the old man of English letters if he could see it and will certainly delight the New York theatregoers who do.

* * *

What a wonderful comedy "Caesar and Cleopatra" is! Shaw wrote it in 1898, when he was on his honeymoon and suffering also from an infected ankle and a broken arm. The circumstances under which he wrote it were almost as ironic as the play. Taking a few pages out of history, Shaw wrote about Caesar and Cleopatra as if they were mortal people. Although this sounds like iconoclasm, Shaw would say that it is realistic common sense and he would be right. It is also witty and illuminating. Since Shaw has always been more than a clown, "Caesar and Cleopatra" includes some extraordinarily sagacious and moving judgments on greatness of character and the humane treatment of human beings.

Caesar is a kindly, paternal teacher of statecraft, Cleopatra as a girl who pulls herself up to the stature and cunning of a queen—this is the genius of the play. Although Sir Cedric's Caesar has the stature and gravity of a great man who has never renounced simplicity, it is lacking in the salt, spring and crackle of Shaw. But these are the elements that he can hardly be expected to discover in his acting if he is not in full command of his voice and not in a volatile mood. Let's recognize the fact that his first-night performance was dull, without assuming that it cannot be better.

* * *

If Miss Palmer's were any better, mortal theatregoers would be dissatisfied with about everything else in the theatre. Of course, the part is irresistible and disarming. Cleopatra is an artless little girl when Caesar first encounters her in the desert. But she grows in grace, womanliness, guile and strength the more Caesar teaches her about government. Dressed in some extraordinarily beautiful costumes, Miss Palmer has caught all the innocence and capriciousness of the part and expressed the myriad aspects of it with lucidity and daintiness. She is all woman, and also Shavian enough to be amusing.

Under Sir Cedric's direction the production is lovely and luminous, and the casting is perceptive. Rolf Gerard has designed a simple and handsome suit of settings which Jean Rosenthal has lighted with style. It is a stroke of genius to cast the doleful Arthur Treacher as the belligerently respectable Brittannus, and the gravel-voiced Ralph Forbes as the pugnacious Rufio.

Bertha Belmore plays the unscrupulous Ftatateeta imposingly, but perhaps with less malevolent craftiness than Shaw intended. Nicholas Joy is perfect as the urbane, cynical Pothinus. As the Egyptian Polonius Ivan Simpson is excellent. John Buckmaster plays Apollodorus, the patron of the arts, with an extravagant and inventive humor that is good for the part and for the whole performance. He gives it shrewd spirit at a time in the second act when it is sagging.

Even with Miss Palmer's lustrous and whimsical portrait of Cleopatra and the many other distinctions in the acting and production, the opening performance had considerable heavy going. But let's hope that Sir Cedric can remedy it when Caesar is himself again. There is too much that is too good in a wise and witty play to be wasted.

DAILY NEWS
DECEMBER 22, 1949

Shaw's 'Caesar and Cleopatra' in A Superior Revival at the National

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Bernard Shaw, having lived past the age of 90 on a vegetable diet, has become a curio, and people make much of his mind remaining so young and lively. Once in a while a revival of a Shaw play is presented on Broadway, and whenever this happens we run up against the always-astonishing discovery that his mind was very old and very wise half a century ago, when he was a nasty little boy. The most recent Shaw revival is "Caesar and Cleopatra," which opened last evening at the National Theatre. The play and the performances make theatregoing a pleasure.

The play and the performances should make theatregoing a pleasure, at any rate, for anybody who really likes to go to shows. The cast, headed by Cedric Hardwicke and Lilli Palmer, includes such first-rate workmen as John Buckmaster, Ralph Forbes, Bertha Belmore, Arthur Treacher and Nicholas Joy. It is the most interesting company I have seen in a long time, for these players are individuals as well as actors, and Hardwicke has given them credit for this in directing them.

Fine Settings.

Visually the play is splendid, with fine, striking settings and costumes by Rolf Gerard, the English artist who made such a stunning pageant out of Katharine Cornell's "That Lady." Mr. Gerard has achieved the magnificence of